

The future of managed democracy

Democracy
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W.F. Pov

Sergei Markov

There are three teams in the Kremlin. None of them are opposed to democracy, but each understands democracy in its own way.

For liberal economists like Economic Development and Trade Minister German Gref, who belongs to the Gaidar-Chubais camp, democracy is essential to the functioning of a normal market economy. But that presupposes the existence of a normal market. In a society just emerging from communism, and where the market is still taking shape, wise rulers sometimes have to violate democratic principles from time to time in the name of progress. The idea of a Russian Pinochet was always popular among liberals with an economic bent, and this helps to explain their support for the coup staged by Boris Yeltsin, his shelling of parliament in 1993 and the information war waged against Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov during the 1996 presidential campaign. This notion of "correcting" the mistakes of democracy occasioned by the "improper understanding" of progressive reforms held by the majority of voters is basically what is meant by the term "managed democracy." Managed democracy will gradually become normal democracy as the economy grows, the standard of living improves and the private sector develops. For this team, then, promoting democracy comes down to pushing ahead with liberal economic reforms.

The second team, the St. Petersburg chekists, hold themselves responsible for restoring Russia to greatness. Their approach is pragmatic. They're all for democracy so long as it helps them to achieve their goal: great-power status. When it hinders them, democracy must be curtailed. The chekists understand democracy as the deployment of power in the interest of the majority. On occasion that means trampling the interests of a self-serving minority -- for example, in order to neutralize the ambitions of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, whom the chekists view as a threat to the welfare of the state.

The third team is made up of St. Petersburg lawyers and political spin doctors for whom the future of Russia holds a European-style state based on the rule of law, a competitive market and a robust civil society with strong political parties. Until these factors are in place, however, the country will have to be run "by hand" on occasion. This team shares with the liberal economists a belief in the link between economic growth and the rise of democracy. Like the chekists they insist on political stability and independence. For them building democracy entails pursuing economic reforms that expand the private sector and a state that makes it possible for its citizens to abide by the law. They have, therefore, concentrated their efforts on administrative and legal reform.

On the whole, the Kremlin holds that the groundwork must be laid before democracy can flourish. This means raising the standard of living, promoting the private sector, creating political stability based on rules of the game that are accepted by the majority, and ensuring the independence of state institutions.

President Putin regards democracy as necessary to the development of the country, but he values the country above all. While the rights of minorities are important to Putin, the powers of the majority are more important. His regime is, therefore, best described as a plebiscitary democracy based on the will of the majority. Finally, Putin believes firmly in the rule of law. One's enemies have to be crushed, of course, but only within the framework of the law.

Managed democracy is not an ideal. It is a natural stage in the development of Russia from Soviet dictatorship to normal democracy. Where democracy and the rule of law are not already in place, the state must be guided by a firm but gentle hand in the name of development and, finally, of democracy.

Critics of Putin's policies can be broken down into four